Hromadske Radio

Interview with Oksana Romaniuk

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"Practically 90% of Ukrainian media survived thanks to grants"

— Oksana Romaniuk

Introduction

Maryana Chornijevych: With the suspension of U.S. foreign aid and the reduction of American financial support for Ukrainian media, what could be the consequences? We discuss this with the director of the Institute of Mass Information, Oksana Romaniuk.

M.C.: What does the future hold for Ukrainian independent media—those that operate without owners and strive to deliver balanced and verified information? What will happen to them, and to us as well, since we are among them?

Oksana Romaniuk: Unfortunately, about 90% of Ukrainian media have survived through grants. In the first year of the invasion, the advertising market collapsed—especially for online media—by 92%, and it has yet to recover. Regional media have been hit the hardest. While some national media have regained advertisers, even they cannot fully cover their costs. In regional media, we found that advertising revenues range from only 3% to 10% of their previous levels. It's simply impossible to survive on such sums.

M.C.: What are the potential consequences?

O.R.: There are many risks. The biggest, I would say, is the weakening of democracy and democratic institutions in Ukraine. Media hold those in power accountable. They don't just inform the public; they ensure transparency in governance. Without proper support, the media cannot fulfill this crucial role. When that happens, corruption rises, abuse of power grows, and human rights restrictions increase.

Another risk is the monopolization of the media space. Before the full-scale invasion, oligarchs controlled the media landscape. Five major oligarchs dominated the sector. That system collapsed after the war began, but as independent media

weaken, some may try to seize control again—turning the media into a tool for influence. I hope this doesn't happen. I know I'm painting a bleak picture.

M.C.: Yes, but it's a reality we must consider. I was thinking about this yesterday while preparing for our discussion. Media control could become an attractive target for those looking to exploit the situation. Oksana, do we know how much of Ukrainian media relied on USAID funding?

O.R.: At least 80%, probably more. The problem is that nearly all media outlets received grants. For some, grants made up 100% of their budgets—they survived entirely on them. Others relied on them for 40–60% of their funding. It's important to note that grants weren't just from the U.S. but also from the European Union and other international institutions. However, American grants were the most significant in terms of investment, not only in Ukraine's economy but in its media sector. I hope European institutions step up to support Ukrainian media during this crisis.

M.C.: Which media outlets will be hit the hardest?

O.R.: Regional media, and the highest-quality independent outlets. They have always operated with limited resources. If they disappear, it will create space for disinformation, propaganda, and manipulative Telegram channels that mislead citizens.

We've already seen cases where fake Telegram channels pop up in small towns, promising financial rewards for subscriptions or pretending to be official pages of brands like McDonald's.

M.C.: What lessons can Ukrainian media learn from this?

O.R.: First, media must seek alternative revenue sources. Regional outlets should engage with their local communities for support. I know people are struggling financially, but sustainable business models like subscriptions, crowdfunding, and audience-backed funding must be explored. Dependence on foreign donors makes media vulnerable during crises.

We also need to better communicate the role of media to the public. Media do not just counter propaganda—they uphold democracy. I want to urge your audience: if you value an independent media outlet or civil society organization, even small donations can make a difference. People need to realize that independent journalism is not just about their right to know—it's about the survival of democracy.

M.C.: There's also the question of how media can best secure funding. I recently read that niche outlets with clear value propositions to their audiences tend to attract more donations. Have you noticed this in your work?

O.R.: Absolutely. Many media outlets are now reevaluating who their audience is and why they are being read. They are emphasizing their unique characteristics and fostering a closer relationship with their readers.
Ukraine already has a well-developed culture of donations. The problem isn't the tools—it's the overall perception of media's role in society. The government should also foster a supportive environment for independent media. So far, I haven't seen a strong response from government institutions. But this crisis is a serious challenge for Ukraine's media landscape, and I believe a response is necessary.
M.C.: We've been discussing the reduction in U.S. financial aid for Ukrainian media with Oksana Romaniuk, Director of the Institute of Mass Information. Thank you for your insights.

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